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Original
Street vending as urban inhabitation: materialities, epistemes, and city-making in Karachi and Mumbai / Haque, A., Saxena, S.. - In: CITY. - ISSN 1360-4813. - (2026), pp. 1-26. [10.1080/13604813.2025.2601408]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/3009497 since: 2026-04-01T14:19:16Z

Publisher:
Taylor & Francis

Published
DOI:10.1080/13604813.2025.2601408

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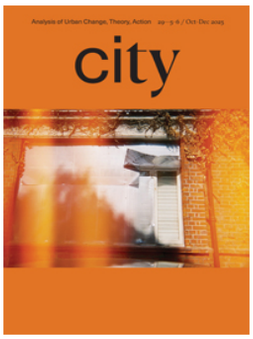
10 October 2026



City

Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccit20

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To cite this article: Aseela Haque & Saanchi Saxena (08 Jan 2026): Street vending as urban inhabitation: materialities, epistemes, and city-making in Karachi and Mumbai, City, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2025.2601408

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2601408

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Street vending as urban inhabitation: materialities, epistemes, and city-making in Karachi and Mumbai

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This contribution approaches street vending as a form of urban inhabitation. Our focus lies in illuminating street vending as an urban episteme: a vernacular practice that showcases intimate knowledge of inhabiting urban space in conditions of extreme precarity. Drawing on ethnographic research in, and an epistemic friendship across, Karachi, Pakistan and Mumbai, India, we trace the materiality of vending practices as they unfold across two modalities of inhabitation. Firstly, we discuss street vending as inventive; assembled through (forced) daily improvisations that draw in the city's infrastructure and transform public space in ways that enfold other citizens and enable affordances beyond economic exchange. Secondly, we dwell on vending's hybrid objects and spaces to indicate the socio-materiality of vending as fluid and thereby holding a range of different capacities of urban

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Keywords **street vending, Mumbai, Karachi, materiality, urban inhabitation**

URL https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2601408

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inhabitation in which knowledge of the urban, bodily labour, and technologies are ever-evolving to cope with difficult environments. We contend that paying attention to this dynamic relation can foreground the often overlooked urban knowledge constituting the city's margins. Thinking with STS scholarship and Southern urbanism, we argue for a renewed focus on materialising street vending and demonstrate that street vending constitutes a crucial form of city-making in the South.

Introduction

In 2018, Karachi's Empress Market, a hub for street vendors, met a violent upheaval when the city government issued directives to remove nearly 1,700 informal shops in the area. Labelled by governance actors as 'encroachers', vendors were unequivocally deemed as illegal occupiers and violently displaced (Anwar et al. 2021). The Empress Market displacements stand out in the city's landscape of forced displacements owing to the sheer scale of the destruction. However, violence in the daily lives of vendors is not a new or infrequent experience. Police vans, for example, routinely patrol the roads in the Saddar neighbourhood to thwart vendor presence. The sound of their sirens sends vendors, many of whom are migrants in the city, scurrying to hide their wares and recede to less controlled streets. In Mumbai too, despite legal protections for vendors, similar scenes of raiding hawkers transpire every day: the tapping of police *lathis* in Dadar Market; the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) van trundling down the road, too fast, occasionally running over the tarps the hawkers have laid down; vendors jostling for every inch of congested space amidst rubbish heaps. Dadar Market is one of the city's oldest and most iconic flower markets and its cultural legacy is reflected in the various street murals of smiling hawkers commissioned by the BMC, that often ironically serve as a backdrop for the daily performances of eviction that take place against those very vendors, most of whom are poor, oppressed caste, older, and single women.

As Tucker and Devlin (2019) note, uncertainty as a logic of governance widely permeates street vending, beyond cities in the Global South. In Karachi and Mumbai too, street vendors face multiple and chronic forms of repressions by the state, planners, and the urban elite and employ various strategies in maintaining their everyday work and presence. In this article, we frame such practices not as informal livelihood strategies conventionally associated with cities in pursuit of development (Sekhani, Mohan, and Medipally 2019) but as practices crucial to dwelling and urban inhabitation everywhere; percolating through and exceeding the spatial strictures of urban governance (Simone 2022).

We ask, therefore: how does street vending as a practice shape urban space? To think of *street vending as urban inhabitation*, we suggest, allows one to exceed the spatial references of housing and home to examine how street spaces are implicated in the everyday struggle of dwelling in the city and trace the ways in which street vending is entangled in the negotiation of habitability through the processual, incremental, and contingent practices that sustain urban life

amidst precarity and contestation. Such framing shifts the spatial reference of inhabitation from the domestic interior (or the house) to the contested terrain of the street, wherein street vending emerges as a practice of rendering the city inhabitable through tenuously held together strategies, and one that persists amid constant threats of displacement, erasure, and everyday violence. This is particularly salient in the South Asian context where the domestication and personalisation of street spaces is a common feature of urban life and gives rise to 'transient domesticities' (Banerjee 2023, 8) that trouble the binaries of public and private space. Our intention is to locate street vendors within an expanded constellation of actors and practices conventionally understood as enabling urban dwelling (such as state and municipal authorities, planners, publics, infrastructures, and informal practices). Our focus lies in the situated ways vending reworks urban space through improvisations, adaptability, and forms of impermanence. This article, therefore, foregrounds the spatial, technical, and embodied knowledge emerging from street vending practices as a lens for re-thinking urban inhabitation from the margins.

To bring inhabitation and street vending into conversation, we follow earlier calls for re-materialising urban geography to draw out an understanding of how vending is implicated in the 'material logic of the urban' (Latham and McCormack 2004, 719). As such, we consider urban sociality as an 'ongoing outcoming of particular configurations of the material' (Latham and McCormack 2004, 710) and the city as a mess of emergent relations brewing from socio-material interactions, wherein the urban figures as a "mechanosphere', a set of constantly evolving systems or networks, machinic assemblages which intermix categories like the biological, technical, social, economic, and so on, with the boundaries of meaning and practice between the categories always shifting' (Amin and Thrift 2002, 78). While attention to urban materialities has often emerged through analyses of infrastructure (Gandy 2005; McFarlane 2008a), mobilities (Jensen, Lassen, and Lange 2019; Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2000), built materials (Choplin 2023; Edensor 2013), and digital media (Willems 2019), we join a small cohort of scholars who focus on street vending and its concomitant material negotiations (Moatasim 2019b; Muñoz 2016; Piazzoni 2022). Our interest lies in tracing the interplay between infrastructure, humans, objects, and technologies, in the spatio-temporal production of street vending and urban space.

In this article, we trace the materialities of vending practices as unfolding across two interrelated modalities of inhabitation: *inventiveness* and *fluidity*. The categories of *inventiveness* and *fluidity* offer insights into how vendors draw on their intimate knowledge of the city and its governance to materially transform urban space, though these modalities are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. Rather, like most street-based practices they shape and inform one another, all the while maintaining distinct concerns. Vending's *inventiveness* emerges in the daily improvisations of the city's infrastructure and built environment to reconfigure public space. It comes forth not as an unbounded form of creativity, but a practice embedded in necessity shaped through ongoing negotiations, fragile collaborations, and knowledge cultivated through lived experience. Vending's *fluidity*, on the other hand, involves socio-technical formulations and temporal strategies that effectuate new forms of vending objects and enfold an ongoing impermanence in everyday life. Such technical and temporal tactics

constitute the makings of roadsides and streets as (fluid) spaces of multiplicities and further destabilise the divides of home/city and public/private space.

Our conceptual framework involves the use of STS thinking to address a key thematic concern of Southern urbanism: the everyday, improvisational, and heterogeneous practices through which cities in the global South are produced, experienced, and understood (Simone 2014). To do this, we recognise the Southern city, and by extension, the Global South, as not bound to any geography, but as a project, a relational periphery, and even a temporal category (Roy 2014). This means that Southern questions can be asked 'from the peripheries of all cities, no matter where they are' (Bhan 2019, 4), thus expanding the knowledge-producing potential of Southern urbanism beyond just a particular geography, and its capacity to provincialise Eurocentrism as just one history among many local co-equals (Chakrabarty 2000).

In the sections that follow, we engage with existing scholarship on street vending and articulate our arguments. Decentring dominant epistemologies of the city, we situate street vending as an *urban episteme*: a vernacular practice showcasing intimate knowledge of inhabiting the city through material improvisations under conditions of extreme precarity. Subsequently, we contextualise the politics in relation to vending in both cities and introduce our methodology of collaboration grounded in the concept of *epistemic friendship*. Thereafter, we introduce *inventiveness* and *fluidity* as practices of urban dwelling, which serve as analytical tools to apprehend how city-making emerges from the urban margins, drawing on empirical narratives from Mumbai and Karachi. The selected stories, placed in dialogue with one another, offer an intimate account of vending as a dynamic and generative force in the production of urban space. We conclude by summarising the conceptual contributions of our approach and underscoring the political imperative of foregrounding vendors' lived experiences and knowledge in reimagining urban futures.

(Re)materialising street vending

Significant contributions in geography and urban studies literature understand street vending spatialities through: notions of everyday transformations, commoning, informality, and relational production. Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski (1999) describe street vending as a prime example of what they term 'everyday urbanism', and street vendors as urbanists who produce new kinds of spaces in creative and, often, subversive ways, thus expanding the definition of public space beyond the formal one. Another way spatial transformation takes place is through 'commoning', wherein everyday actors perform as 'agents of urbanization' (Caldeira 2017, 5), often constituting a form of obstructionism that contributes to street-building 'from below', challenging the liberal idea that it is only forces of motion (unhindered circulation and flow of capital) that produce cities (Bandyopadhyay 2022). Thus, 'space-making through encroachment' (Bandyopadhyay 2022, 175) as practised by street vendors, is what makes city-building such a historically-specific and meaningful process.

Another spatial practice that is often linked with street vending is informality. Scholars attentive to the spatial question have written about

complicating the informal vs. formal binary, the state's regulation of informality, and vendors' perception of informal work (Bernal-Torres, Peralta-Gómez, and Thoene 2020; Falla and Valencia 2019; Lindell 2019; Luthra and Monteith 2023; Sekhani, Mohan, and Medipally 2019; Xue and Huang 2015). Here, informality is not merely an economic construct and street work is not just referring to livelihoods reliant on the street; it also conveys the 'enormous work required to access, produce, and maintain street spaces' (Lindell 2019, 4). Resisting simplistic reductions or generalisations, urban scholars have illuminated the nuanced relations between street vendors and the diverse social actors who share urban space, whether these are state authorities (Anjaria 2016; Skinner 2010), shopkeepers (Crossa 2009), elite residents (Baviskar 2020; Schindler 2014), or even the social reproduction of the city at large (Clark 2013). In doing so, they highlight the intersectional dynamics that shape the production, navigation and accessibility of street vending spaces (Saxena 2024).

Beyond a focus on spatial practices, vending interactions with objects and non-humans have also been examined, such as the use of wheelbarrows by street vendors in Nigeria to negotiate their access to and enable their presence in the city (Adebayo and Akinyemi 2019), or the importance of roadside trees for vendors in securing shade and forging emotional connections to place (Basu and Nagendra 2020). However, the expansive material negotiations that vendors make in their daily lives under extreme strains requires further inquiry. Doing so, we believe, additionally explicates the forms and processes by which the city emerges as an assemblage and dwelling within figures as process. Therefore, we attend to 'practices of gathering, composition, alignment, and reuse' (McFarlane 2011, 149) within vending worlds that produce possibilities of urban inhabitation. Our intention is also to pull everyday objects imbricated in vending practices; pushcarts, flyovers, collapsible stools, walls, nails, and rickshaws, that otherwise may disappear in the crowded terrain of urban things to the foreground. Attuning to the 'constitutive human-nonhuman multiplicity of relations' that inform dwelling (McFarlane 2011, 651), we hope to illustrate how the vending city unfolds in ever-shifting and ever-forming material negotiations. We understand these materialities as multiple, constantly in formation, and co-constituted by the social, the economic, and the spatial (Gupta 2023) as well as providing the possibility of adaptation and survival in the city (Vasudevan 2015).

Our methodological approach draws on STS thinking to address key concerns of Southern urbanism: particularly its efforts to decentre Western notions of city-making and diversify the epistemic foundations of urban theory (Robinson 2006), as well as attend to the diverse everyday modes of producing urban spaces in the global South (Simone 2014). Based on our ethnographic research in Karachi and Mumbai, we argue that vending constitutes an intimate relation with urban dwelling across city contexts by means of making the city inhabitable for others and as a practice that makes inhabiting the city possible for vendors.

Our aim is not to compare the two cities as 'case studies'; but to 'dislocate metropolitan concerns of urban theory' with informality (Palat Narayanan 2021) by illuminating street vending as an *urban episteme*: a vernacular practice showcasing intimate knowledge of inhabiting the city through material

improvisations under conditions of extreme precarity. This definition of urban episteme takes lead from material-semiotic approaches (Law 2008, 146) and underscores how ordinary practices in urban living confer 'semiotic relationality'; forming a network of mutually constitutive elements, 'heterogeneity'; involving different actors (human and non-human), and 'materiality'; wherein infrastructures and objects are enrolled in the enactment of 'the social'. Urban episteme, therefore, denotes a distributed mode of knowing the city, emerging through everyday material practices that bind together infrastructure, people, governance, and objects in contingent and provisional ways. While material-semiotic approaches emphasise the city's material diversity, its multiple, coexisting enactments, Southern urbanism affords a sensibility to attend to how such multiplicity is lived, sustained, and recalibrated in vending practices through everyday acts of repair, improvisation, and infrastructural entanglement. These entanglements are not totalizing; they are 'partial connections' (Strathern 2004), tenuous alignments of various fragments of the urban world that momentarily cohere. Together, STS thinking and Southern urbanism offer a composite analytic: the former attunes us to the material-semiotic and infrastructural enactments through which urban worlds take shape, while the latter situates these enactments within the everyday, political, and epistemic conditions of Southern city-making, helping us expand what kind of practices are understood as constituting the city.

Approaching vending in this way further resonates with insights from STS and infrastructure studies, which emphasise the situated and embodied character of knowledge production (Haraway 2013) and forms of expertise that are relational, and embedded in everyday negotiations as 'porous practices through which relational and physical infrastructure networks interconnect' (Lemanski and Massey 2023, 1309). Following Star's (1999, 386) call to attend to the invisible work [see also (Anand 2020)] that sustains infrastructures, 'people whose work goes unnoticed', we suggest that vending practices constitute a vernacular knowledge that makes urban life possible, even as it remains marginalised in dominant accounts of the city. In this sense, street vending unsettles dominant epistemologies of the city by illuminating how urban life is continually reassembled from the margins, through practices that are at once material (such as setting up stalls, installing tarps, moving carts) and epistemic (understanding regulatory frameworks, anticipating evictions, re-designing carts).

Our analysis is further informed by thinking through relational materialism. As such, we examine the practice of vending as incumbent upon how 'materials are interactively constituted' (Law and Mol 1995, 277) in the making of urban sociality. We argue that vending emerges as an urban strategy that enacts 'material diversity'; a 'form of linking' (Law and Mol 1995, 282) through which heterogeneous entities come together without settling into stability in the tenuous achievement of city-dwelling in the face of precarity. Vending's socio-materiality is therefore defined less by an inert presence of a human vendor on a sidewalk, but by the interactions between an ensemble of urban agents, rhythms, institutions, and objects: sidewalks, roads, pushcarts, animals, cars, pedestrians, police, tarps, temporalities and so on. These relations, that are informed by power asymmetries, do not make for a stable whole, but continually throw out

mutations and revisions and it is these very fluctuating material constellations, emerging from the knowledge of adapting to and reworking urban space, that we aim to explicate. This article, therefore, foregrounds the situated knowledge through which street vendors come to know, navigate, and inhabit the city, and the empirical accounts from Karachi and Mumbai trace how such knowledge manifests in practices of *inventiveness* and *fluidity*, illuminating how vending materially and meaningfully reconfigures the city amid conditions of uncertainty and precarity.

Mumbai and Karachi: an epistemic friendship

We start with the context of our two cities: Mumbai, India and Karachi, Pakistan. India, like all former colonies, reflects the burden of colonial history in the geographies of its cities. The dominant strain of urbanism in India is a curious hybrid of the fantasy of modernist, totalizing planning, shaped by colonial legacy, smart cities, planning cities from scratch, rigid functional zoning, and so on, as well as the ambition of the state to 'reconcile the economic demands of global finance capital with the compulsions of the political, rooted in local power structures' (Nair 2013, 61). Systems of caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and more intersect at every level of city production, influencing the plans 'from above' as well as everyday dwelling at the ground level. The experience of urban life in India, then, is contingent on the political situation of the dweller, especially in a context where the urban majority are used to the challenges of negotiating the 'terror of infrastructure' on a daily basis (McFarlane 2008b, 351).

In Mumbai, despite national laws that on paper protect their livelihood, street vendors, who are largely unorganised, still face regular harassment from authorities, and their rights are based on a 'series of exceptions and contingent legality' (Bandyopadhyay 2015, 204). The perception of hawking as a public nuisance issue in the mid-nineteenth century officially brought it under the ambit of local urban governance (Jumani and Joshi 1984 as cited in Anjaria 2016), and till today, street vendors are targeted for violating public health, free urban circulation and trade, and a bourgeois ideal of public space. Dadar Market, in particular, faces extra scrutiny because of a Supreme Court ruling stating that the area outside train stations should be free of encroachments for up to 150 metres, and vendors routinely enter into everyday performances of extortion, negotiation, and even compromise with the municipal authorities (Anjaria 2011).

Pre-dominant urban planning in Pakistan follows a similar trajectory of modernist logics. In Karachi, street vending is largely deemed illegal, and in the absence of formal regulatory frameworks, vendors are left to negotiate harassment, insecurity, and uncertain access to urban space (Moosvi 2023). In the postcolonial Pakistani city, urban transformations carrying the specific logos of modernity come up against and erode long-standing quotidian inhabitations and relations on the street (Viqar 2019). Such erasures are additionally informed by paradigms of security wherein data and infrastructure are enrolled in manufacturing smart and 'safe cities' at the cost of reducing people to over policed objects (Hong 2022). Marginalised populations further bear the brunt

of uneven planning in Karachi as the government responds to environmental crises by problematising and evicting people from working class settlements (Kaker and Anwar 2024). Such tensions in the urban landscape and street public culture take shape in highly uneven contexts characterised by forms of entitled urbanism (Moatasim 2019a) in which urban infrastructures confer fewer and less frequent provisions to the city's working-class residents. In this hostile context where labour practices and one's claims over urban space and municipal services are dependent on one's class and caste positionality (Butt 2023), street vendors appropriating urban interstices employ material and temporal strategies to enact 'long term temporariness' (Moatasim 2019b) in routine maintenance of their lives and activities and to secure shade and cope with heat (Macktoom, Anwar, and Cross 2024). As such, vendors entreating life in the city's interstices are caught in a limbo of visibility/invisibility; wherein 'visibility … is crucial but also carefully mediated by forms of hiding to avoid eviction by a municipality that roleplays in contradictory forms as collaborator and evictor' (Haque 2024, 17).

Our respective field sites are our own cities and sites of our separate research projects; Karachi and Mumbai. Aseela has conducted 10 months of fieldwork (2022–24) in Karachi for her doctoral dissertation examining urban roads and the politics of inhabitation in urban Pakistan. Saanchi did 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai (2022–24) as part of her doctoral research on gendered and caste-based production of street vending spatialities in India. Both used methods of participant observation, interviews, and go-alongs. All participant names and identifying details have been anonymised and ethical concerns regarding participant information, informed consent, and data protection have been rigorously addressed in our respective research projects.

Through this paper, we are attempting to think with and across these two cities in an act of epistemic friendship (Ramírez-i-Ollé 2019) between two researchers. Although seldom examined in depth, the role of friendship in research has been increasingly acknowledged by scholars who show how an ethic of friendship often permeates research practice: dismantling hierarchical dynamics in fieldwork (Tillmann-Healy 2003), fostering multivocality and care in the production of knowledge (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014), and revealing how friendship with interlocutors allows 'their interests [to] come to matter to us,' making friendship not a threat to objectivity but constitutive of the research process itself (Ramírez-i-Ollé 2019, 309). In particularly difficult contexts of war and periods of crisis, de Regt (2015) argues that friendship as a method comes to have a heightened value as conventional methods become improbable. Most of these works, however, speak of friendship between researchers and their interlocutors. Echoing Sarah Marie Hall's (2025, 4) recent provocation of taking the 'ubiquitous, so unassuming, so boringly ordinary' practice of friendship seriously to uncover its political potential within academia, we ask how might friendship between two researchers open up new modes of knowledge-production?

McFarlane (2010) acknowledges that reading about a particular city often prompts us to connect its claims and observations to other cities we may know or study. A similar mode of comparative engagement shaped our interactions when we met, facilitated by our positions within European institutions and diasporic contexts, an opportunity that would otherwise be impeded by nationalist constraints, and enabled a dialogic exploration of street vending

practices in each others' cities. We follow in the tracks of comparative urbanism that has addressed the need for theory to emerge from diverse urban experiences, beyond offering empirical variation (Ren 2022; Robinson 2016a; Robinson and Roy 2016; Roy 2009), and that advocates a method of 'allowing the sites to speak to one another' (Brill 2022; Robinson 2016b), but remain attentive to the practical constraints that determine which cities can be included in comparative methodological inquiries.

Our 'epistemic friendship' helps overcome such constraints and has enabled a form of collaboration necessary to open up modes of inquiry that are challenging or impossible in contexts of long-standing geopolitical conflict.[1] Sharing stories about our cities, our experiences of fieldwork, and working together, we believe, has yielded deeper insights and more analytically productive outcomes. As such, the 'epistemic' value of our friendship lies in the potential for analytical engagement with two cities—that despite their similarities (coastal, migrant, and historically governed by the same colonial sub-division of the Bombay Presidency)—are divided by a complex history of colonialism and regional politics. This complicates not only the possibility of visiting one another's city, but also of conducting research. Due to these challenges, it is exceedingly rare for research on Karachi and Mumbai to be represented within the same scholarly discourse on cities. We believe an unfortunate consequence of such hardening borders impacts knowledge production on cities in ways that reify scalar thought through cultivating 'singular loyalty' and attachments in thought and practice, codifying contemporary spatializations, and ultimately reproducing hierarchical relations (Isin 2007, 224).

We, therefore, forge our epistemic friendship by aiming to decentre ethno-nationalist divisions and foreground the shared struggles of poor and working-class residents in both cities against the forces of neoliberal urban governance and middle-class desires (Mallick 2018; Anwar 2012; Baviskar 2020). Part of the repression faced by street vendors comes as a result of the quest for a 'world-class' city that justifies forms of sanitizing and ordering that are exclusionary in nature (McFarlane 2008a). It is in this framework that vendors' spatial claims are not recognised as legitimate city-making forces, and their presence on streets is usually considered a violation or an encroachment (Etzold 2015; Hidalgo 2022). Even as 'world class city' politics convenes localised imaginaries of urban success (Palat Narayanan 2020), the outcomes for marginalised dwellers, across city contexts, of displacement, violence, and disenfranchisement remain glaringly similar. We now turn to the stories from Mumbai and Karachi, told through the lens of inventive practices and fluid materialities, which inform our understanding of street vending as a mode of urban inhabitation.

Inventive inhabitations

We begin by discussing street vending as an *inventive* practice; assembled through daily improvisations that draw in the city's infrastructure and built environment to continually re-make public space. These improvisations reflect an intimate knowledge and re-working of urban space cultivated through lived experience and everyday negotiations of the city's shifting conditions. Such

dexterity in renderings of city-space often afford numerous conveniences to other residents. Vending's inventiveness therefore accommodates not only the livelihood needs of the vendors, but confers benefits of place-making for the wider urban public.

In Dadar market, near a centrally-located train station in Mumbai, vendors improvise the street infrastructure around them constantly. One of the ways the vendors, mostly migrant men, appropriate the liminal space beneath the flyover is by hanging ropes from the ceiling from which they display their goods (flower garlands, shoes, belts, pictures, etc.). This forms a curtain around the vendors, letting customers browse easily as well as marking a kind of spatial boundary around each stall. Meanwhile the flower and vegetable vendors on the street use the textured surface of the outside wall of the flyover in various ways: storing their water bottles in the concrete crevices, hooking storage bags from grills, driving nails into the wall to hang tarps from, and so on. The street vendors in Dadar have a very simple stall set-up, ranging from collapsible tables and stools to merely a piece of cloth spread over the ground. Their improvisations stem from their need to gain additional storage, to make their work space functional, and also to be able to set up and dismantle their stalls as quickly as possible. The inventive spatial practices of vendors, emerging from the material and political context of vending, ultimately 'blurs' the edges of the city (Shetty 2012) and opens up the potential for multifunctional public spaces, challenging the notion that street infrastructure is only for one purpose (flyovers for vehicles, footpaths for pedestrians, etc.) (Figure 1).

A similar re-working of infrastructure is reflected in Shahid's everyday work at a bus stop at one of Karachi's thoroughfares, a wide dual carriage road with high-speed traffic. After many failed attempts to set up in other places in the city, Shahid tied ropes on either sides of the bus stop's structure and hung up the clothes he was selling; pants, shirts, and women's shalwar kameez. Shahid worked part time as a security guard for a restaurant nearby and set up this stall for a few hours a day in this strategic spot to catch the attention of those waiting for the bus and those alighting to supplement his income. Unable to afford renting a shop, he framed his improvisation as a 'necessity'. When asked how long he imagined he could stay, he shrugged and said, 'I'll stay as long as it works, and see what happens next,' a response that underscores how such improvisation is conditioned by the precarity of vending labour, requiring vendors to continually *re-invent* the sites and strategies through which they sustain their work.

Similar constellations appear in other road interstices. Majed, a stove-repairman, working under the Gizri flyover repurposed a spare stove frame in a practical way. Using a metal nail jutting out from the flyover's column, Majed hung his stove frame high above to indicate to potential customers his whereabouts. In the crowded scenes under the flyover, the hanging stove marked his presence and rendered him more noticeable to others (Haque 2024). The concrete floor of the flyover served as his work station, where a pile of stoves, wires, and tools gestured his labour of repair. In this small scene, the flyover was not a singular object of infrastructure but part of a materially diverse urban assemblage, enacted simultaneously as transit architecture, workspace, and signboard. Such moments exemplify how urban materialities

Figure 1: Flyover spaces, Dadar Market, Mumbai (Source: Saxena).

are multiple, continually reconfigured through situated practices of use, repair, and improvisation. These multiplicities, however, are not neutral, rather they are a product of ongoing class inequalities, uneven access to space, and the political and regulatory constraints that shape the possibilities of urban life.

During acute shortages of municipal supply of natural gas in the winter months and 'gas load shedding', many people in the Gizri market were on the lookout to convert their stoves to adjust to the use of gas cylinders. Most residents, across class positions, rely on natural gas for domestic cooking and heating in Karachi. Spotting Majed's stove frame in these times was an opportune juncture; here was someone helping to acclimatise to the shifts and gaps in the city's gas provisions. Vending's inventive capacities are

captured in these very re-orderings: not only in the ways in which vendors mobilise the city's built environment but also suture continuities for dwelling in the urban present in the face of fickle and erratic infrastructural conditions. Majed's work signifies how vendors' knowledge and labour practices facilitate city-dwellers and material infrastructures to endure despite breakdowns. Vending, therefore, operates as a vital practice of collaborative work in the city (Simone 2004), holding together its material seams that weaken and tear apart.

As a form of place-making, vending confers further benefits to urban dwellers. As Bandyopadhyay (2022) shows in Kolkata, street vendors in Mumbai, too, tend to form a network of stalls, particularly in congested market areas, which becomes more than the sum of its parts (Figure 2). Flower vendors often hang colourful tarps over their stalls, which merge with one another forming a continuous shaded walkway, protecting pedestrians, customers, and commuters from the sun and the rain. Providing shade, then, becomes one way for vendors to make spatial claims, especially relevant in a broader context where shade constitutes a site of struggle for informal workers (Macktoom, Anwar, and Cross 2024). At night, vegetable vendors on the footpath use battery-operated lights, illuminating the city streets in areas where the street lighting might be inadequate. These material transformations encourage pedestrians to walk on the footpaths rather than on the roads, also boosting the vendors' sales. These spatial affordances can also be aesthetic in nature; the skilful arrangement of colourful flowers, sprigs, and blooms by the flower vendors tend to draw in photographers, social media bloggers, and urban elites, which helps cement the cultural iconic status of Dadar Market and confer legitimacy on the vendors, but only to a certain extent, for municipal raids still take place on an almost daily basis. Street vending, in making certain spatial claims or 'encroachments', re-make city streets not only into functional spaces of dwelling, but also into spaces of cultural consumption and visual pleasure, enticing passers-by to linger. This is especially significant in the context of Mumbai, where the vendors' right to livelihood is often pitted against the abstract rights of pedestrians to an 'encroachment-free' public space.

Sometimes, inventive practices involve more than material configurations. They convene knowledge of urban processes accumulated through lived experience. Under Karachi's Gizri flyover, Hafez sets up and runs his father's fruit cart every day. He maintains his presence and activities in the area through an informal 'understanding' with the governing municipal authority where he sets up his business, achieved through surreptitiously organised 'fees' paid to municipal representatives. There are limits to these unofficial agreements, however, and evictions can occur when new management takes over or at the behest of senior officers hoping to make changes. Hafez employs his knowledge of the city's municipal boundaries to cope with these unsteady arrangements. The wheels on his cart serve a further logistical function; they allow him to quickly respond to changing dynamics in the politics of the street. When a raiding authority arrives, Hafez removes the rocks carefully placed against the wheels of his cart and moves the wooden wagon into the adjoining streets that cross over onto another municipal territory where the raiding authority cannot extend its

Figure 2: Spatial affordances of street vending, Dadar market, Mumbai (Source: Saxena).

eviction mandate. Hafez, therefore, navigates the city through a knowledge of its municipal borders and strategically utilises the city's fragmented land control to keep his livelihood intact (Haque 2024).

However, vendors' inventive practices are not an outcome of an unperturbed exercise in creativity, rather they are designs of necessity; effectuated through painstaking negotiations, bargains, and tenuous collaborations. Vendors' spatial practices and material orderings then are not only an alternative imagination of cityspace, but forms of making-do and scraping out possibilities of inhabiting the urban. As the improvisations and situated knowledge of vendors in Dadar Market and Gizri indicate, certain violent pre-conditions (strains, fears, threats) shape the inventive forms under consideration.

Fluid possibilities

Second, we reflect on vending's *fluidity* as objects and technologies are modified and reworked in making inhabiting the precarious city possible and temporal strategies are employed to stave off threats of displacement. Thinking of vending's fluidity is an attempt to understand how forms of dwelling in the city that engender endurance and at the same time 'rupture habitual modes of being' (Lancione 2020, 279) are epistemically and materially co-produced. Vendors' technical and temporal variations emerge from a knowledge of how to endure and modulate one's presence in a difficult and hostile urban terrain where vendor presence is criminalised by governance authorities. Such embodied modifications serve to produce fluid space through provisional abodes, against dominant logics of roads and streets as sites of traffic, to encompass a range of multiplicities.

Our first empirical story comes through vending's hybrid objects; a pushcart-rickshaw composite in Karachi, to indicate the socio-materiality of vending as fluid, in that its identities and affordances shift in response to changing bodily capacities, infrastructure, and governance pressures, enabling different ways of inhabiting the city. Laet and Mol's (2000) discussion of the Zimbabwe Bush pump through their notion of fluidity serves as an inspiration here. Fluidity as a condition of a technology, they write, is constituted by its many identities as a mechanical object, as an object realised through a community's efforts, and buttressed by a national apparatus. The pump, they argue, has many identities and each of them 'contains a *variant* of its environment' (Laet and Mol 2000, 252).

Technologies, therefore, are not entirely independent from the contexts in which they are installed, upgraded, or modified. In this case, the rickshaw-pushcart hybrid (Figure 3) emerged from the contingencies of Sikander's life. After a serious motorcycle accident that shattered his knees, he spent two months in the hospital and required surgery. Since then, his knees have partially recovered but not enough for pushing the cart every day for hours on end. He shared (with Aseela) that he got tired quickly and simply did not have the strength left in his legs to evade police or municipal officers. He needed speed, and on Karachi's roads, he mentioned it is better to be off one's feet—so he bought a rickshaw and approached an experienced mechanic to remove the roof and back and attach his pushcart to it with bolts. With this new vending device, he is able to keep his body and his livelihood intact. The pushcart's modifications are shaped by the effects of the network in which it is entangled (Lieto 2017): the human body's limits and changing capacities, the meshwork of road infrastructure that puts walking bodies at risk, and governance schemas that problematise vendor presence. Shifting forms and functions enable different identities for the hybrid object when faced with different pressures of the network; at different moments easing the body's experience of the urban, becoming appropriately mobile given the city's infrastructure and enabling speed to evade authorities. This case urges us to reflect on the fluidity of vending as relational, a practice in which objects are re-made to adapt to bodily limits and regulatory pressures, producing multiple context-dependent identities that make urban life possible under conditions of precarity. However, this strength evidenced by this case also comes at a cost. These shifts towards motorised forms of vending objects

Figure 3: Sikander poses with his cousin on his rickshaw-pushcart hybrid in Karachi (Source: Haque).

speak to fluidity's ambivalences (Beisel and Schneider 2012). Such innovations come at a cost when taking place in a context of massive strains on pedestrian urbanism and signify further erosion of quotidian, slow relations with the street.

Fluidity of objects is not only socio-technical but a temporal enactment. While Sikander's modifications on his pushcart were permanent, vendors such as Vimla *maushi* in Dadar deploy temporariness as a means to engender fluidity. Vimla *maushi* is a dominant caste Maharashtrian woman, who has been selling *anda-pav* (boiled egg sandwich) to the evening and late-night commuters outside Dadar station for decades. She lives in a nearby building underneath which she has built a whole kitchen, where she prepares and cooks 340 eggs every day (see Figure 4). Her actual vending stall, though, consists of a very simple plastic stool and wooden crate set-up (see Figure 5). This simplicity, in fact, is a deliberate choice in order to make her vending furniture conducive to quick disassembly and reassembly, as was made evident to me (Saanchi) during a particular incident involving an eviction.

It was late evening, and I was standing next to Vimla *maushi* when her neighbouring vendor exclaimed, 'Singham[2] *aa raha hai kya?*' (Is that *Singham* coming?). A few constables walked up, beating their *lathis* on the ground, yelling at people to clear the road. They asked Vimla *maushi* to pack away her *anda-pav* stall because 'Sir is coming'. She quickly took apart her vending set-up, hung the bag on a hook on the station wall, hid the disassembled parts of the wooden

Figure 4: Vimla *maushi's* kitchen, Dadar (Source: Saxena).

crate under the flyover, and with her neighbour's help, concealed the box of eggs and pav under a tarp. She insisted on carrying the heavy box herself though, saying we would break her eggs. The improvisational nature of her stall and her practice of using her surroundings to strategically hide from the police, points to how inventiveness and fluidity are enmeshed. The police finally swept in, led by the *bada sahib* (big boss/senior officer) who was walking with a swagger. Under the yellow sodium lights of the street lamps, a plain-clothed BMC officer was breaking the wooden crates of the vegetables and fruits vendors who did not 'hide' their vending wares in time. A chilling scene. The authorities moved ahead, and the vendors were free for now. Vimla *maushi* resumed her business, quickly setting up her stall again, but still kept the eggs underneath the tarp,

Figure 5: Vimla *maushi's* anda-pav stall, Dadar (Source: Saxena).

telling customers to stand and eat at the side and not crowd around her table, so as to not draw any more attention.

The simplicity of Vimla *maushi's* stall, then, became a way of her to enact temporariness, the perception and physicality of which not only helps her evade the police but also play into the performance of eviction; authorities are placated as long as vendors are not actively vending in front of them, and vendors only need to cover their wares or gather their bundles rather than actually physically leaving. This form of 'loose policing' is a way of managing the informal (Chiu 2013). The assemblage that makes up the *anda-pav* stall also function individually to aid fluidity, for instance the tarp works both as a tool to protect the food (bread buns and boiled eggs) from dust and keep it

warm and fresh, as well as a means of concealing her vending activity from the police. These material forms of fluidity are essentially a direct response to the constant threat of evictions faced by street vendors: 'by deliberately avoiding structural permanence ... [it] offers both flexibility and resilience to urban built environments' (Moatasim 2019b, 292). Keeping with Laet and Mol (2000), the stall is not a singular, static object but a fluid constellation whose form and function emerge from interactions among Vimla *maushi*, the street, the police, and the material components themselves. Its fluidity enables her to navigate precarious conditions, transforming constraints into possibilities for continuity and improvisation.

We have so far discussed how vending relies on the fluidity of objects. How might the variable objects that make up vending practices incur specific spatial implications? With the enactment of objects come the enactment of spatialities (Law 2002). Variable and fluid objects, therefore, render the makings of fluid space; constituted between the conditions of change necessary to cope with shifting relations between elements and the need for some form of continuity (Law 2002). Here, our empirical example comes from push-carts in Karachi that are reconfigured to accommodate sleep. The pushcart or *thela*, in these cases imagined differently in addition to its quintessential functioning and value to showcase and store sell-able goods, offers bodily reprieve and shelter (Figure 6).

(Figure 7) Shahnawaz, a 21-year-old migrant from Peshawar, moves his pushcart along one of the city's thoroughfares. The simple wheels and platform

Figure 6: Shahnawaz's pushcart stands at the edge of one of the city's thoroughfares. Karachi (Source: Haque).

Figure 7: Customers, mid journey, stop and browse. Karachi (Source: Haque).

contraption is weighed down by a great assortment of sweaters, socks, woollen hats, and scarves. In the cool of December in Karachi, passers-by in motorcycles and cars stop at his cart to peruse for warm clothing. Shahnawaz spends his entire day and night by this road that rages with traffic at most daylight hours. Every couple of hours, he pushes the heavy cart back and forth 200 metres along the road. Such minor relocations are meant to dissuade any equivalence of permanence that might conjure attention from the police or municipal officials. Long term presence is achieved then not only through avoiding structural permanence (Moatasim 2019a) like Vimla *maushi*, but by appearing 'on the move', untethered to a specific location. Around the evening, Shahnawaz stations the cart next to a green median, where at the end of the day he will push the cart up the median, cover up and bind his wares tightly in a cloth, and open a hatch on the side of his cart that reveals a space just small enough for a man his size to crawl in. Shahnawaz, somewhat hidden by the green foliage on the median, sleeps inside his cart. As he showed me (Aseela) his small pillow and blanket neatly folded in a corner of this modest inner bench, I asked him if he could breathe in there, with the hatch closed. 'I'm just fine', he told me, pointing to the slight gaps in the wood frames that offer some ventilation. He sleeps this way in the winter months. In the summer, he gives up the cart in favour of working at a Peshawari restaurant nearby that provides lodging to the staff.

The doubling of the vending cart both as an object of work and rest divulges the ways in which the city's most marginalised humans secure sleep. For Shahnawaz, the cart as a fluid object functions as half-infrastructure; not

wholly one thing or the other, an in-between attainment tenuously patched together to create provisional possibilities for life to continue. Vending, thus, merges everyday needs of livelihood and habitation into a multifaceted strategy. Vending objects, here, do more than to enact the everyday hustle of evading displacement, they confer the very possibilities of inhabitation through the makings of fluid space, such that roadsides come to have multiple and variant identities as tenuous abodes, sites of traffic, and commercial exchange. Such spaces, defying uniformity and stability, are marked by 'mixtures and gradients' in the enactment of contingent worlds that do not depend on any singular element for their function like network spaces but rather every element may be spared (Law and Mol 1995, 660). As a practice, vending folds spaces of continuities or negotiations (Murdoch 1998) wherein an instrumentalised ambiguity sets the conditions for urban dwelling. Vending's fluid spatialities then characterise an absence of strict boundaries between public/private and home/city to confer street spaces as deeply relational, leading to a compounding unease with systems of (spatial) classification. Fluidity, thus, corresponds to the makings of multiple apertures through which both vending and dwelling become possible, pushing beyond conventional understandings of inhabitation as tied to housing, and instead locating it in the provisional, mobile, and negotiated practices of everyday life on the street. Street vending, here, cannot be seen as outside of or separate from dwelling, rather it is a function of living in the city for many marginalised residents that affords possibilities not only of livelihood, but also of shelter. These apertures of technological, temporal, and spatial re-workings breed elasticity in how tools, technologies, and places are imagined and enacted in the production of vending in cities.

Conclusion

Law and Mol (1995, 291, original emphasis) write, 'Relational materialism does not just reside in objects. *It's also a way of telling stories*.' In this article, we have gathered some stories of vending in a vast world of possible stories across Karachi and Mumbai to relate the everyday material negotiations that vendors make. Within those constellations, street vending figures as more than a livelihood strategy. Based on ethnographic research in both cities, we show how the socio-materiality of vending coheres as a form of inhabitation for the city's most marginalised dwellers. The arguments divulged in this paper relied on blending STS thinking to foreground how the urban is enacted through material-semiotic practices, as well as approaches in Southern urbanism to trace how such enactments are taking shape in the everyday political conditions of the city. We focused on the daily material negotiations vendors make through *inventive* improvisations of infrastructure and space in interstitial sites, and *fluid* socio-material, temporal forms, and practices by which vending continues to evolve and respond to the harsh urban present (and future). It must be noted that these categories are not neat, and much like Vimla *maushi*'s impermanent stall, have dynamic boundaries. These categories encompass epistemic practices and material negotiations of urban space that constitute plural ways of seeing and knowing the city. Beyond vending, these registers offer ways for urban

geographers to revitalise conceptions of the urban as assemblage; emerging from doings, actions, and practices in which 'intra-actions' (Barad 2007) between objects, humans, and non-humans convene urban realities in multiplicities and shifting forms, shaped by power and inequalities.

Two things require clarification. Firstly, even though vending has maintained our focus, these improvisations are not specific to vending but may comport other urban realities too. How marginalised residents manage housing, mobility, work, and other facets of urban dwelling can be refracted through these apertures. Second, here we have thought through materialities but we recognise that inverting to think instead of the properties of materials involved in vending (plastic, wood, cellophane, etc.) would complicate these vocabularies even more (Ingold 2007). Further inquiries in urban materialities may take up these conceptual impulses or take them apart, depending on the kinds of stories that are told in the limitless stories about 'the kaleidoscope of materialities' (Law and Mol 1995, 291). Framing these questions 'from the South' can further sharpen the STS-informed approach advanced in this paper, highlighting how context, power, and situated practice shape objects, spaces, and urban life.

The primary argument of this article has been this: the practice of vending actively *makes* cities. While vendors encounter pervasive precarity and harassment, and the materialities that emerge are shaped by such conditions, vending simultaneously constitutes a mode of urban production. As a practice, it generates inventive forms of spatial and infrastructural life: re-making infrastructures, sustaining forms of continuity, and enabling everyday survival within shifting regulatory and economic constraints. The objects and arrangements that comprise vending in Mumbai and Karachi are fluid and adaptive: they are continually refigured in response to bodily limitations and state regulation, producing multiple context-dependent identities through which urban life becomes possible. This fluidity is not only socio-technical, but also temporal, enacted through ongoing adjustments that negotiate change and continuity. Variable and mutable objects, therefore, render the production of fluid urban space, constituted through the dynamic interplay between adaptation and persistence.

By situating STS thinking within the political-relational lens of Southern urbanism, we illustrate vending as an *urban episteme*: a vernacular practice that showcases intimate knowledge of inhabiting urban space in conditions of extreme precarity. This contribution enables us to understand how, in framing the street as an 'outcome of a negotiated process' (Anjaria 2016, 8), street vending becomes a kind of 'everyday urbanism' (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999) that is inextricably linked to modes of urban dwelling. We argue that street vending as a form of urban inhabitation is a meaningful and political act, often overlooked by dominant imaginations of the urban, and also holding within it the potential to rupture the status quo (Lancione 2020). Such ruptures occur not as events, but as 'rhythms and ensembles of survival' for vendors that are an ever present and enduring part of urban life (Guma et al. 2023).

In the end, this paper conceptually bridges STS and Southern urban thinking, grounded in an epistemic friendship across India and Pakistan that responds to calls for solidarity in a context where urban informal practices are routinely criminalised and marginalised. By attending to the everyday negotiations,

spatial tactics, and relational practices of street vending, we challenge dominant framings that reduce it to mere informal economic activity, and instead position it as a meaningful mode of urban living. Our approach thus calls for more attentive, situated, and collaborative engagements with practices constituting the urban margins, one that recognises their role not just in surviving the city, but in actively making it.

Notes

1 In the aftermath of the April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, tensions between India and Pakistan have flared with India assigning blame for the attack on Pakistan, expelling Pakistani diplomats, and threatening to dissolve the Indus Water Treaty of 1960 that enables sharing of water from rivers flowing in both countries. Since then the two countries went to war for 4 days and the ceasefire remains fragile.

2 *Singham* is a popular Bollywood action movie franchise featuring a macho, larger-than-life cop character.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our interlocutors for sharing their stories, the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback, and Beth Perry and the editorial team of City for their editorial support. We are further indebted to Uli Beisel, Devra Waldman, and the participants of the workshop, 'The epistemic tangles of urban inhabitation' at the University of Sheffield in 2024, for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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